

# Who Are the Parents?

WILLARD ABRAHAM

In the present period of uncertainty there is more need than ever before for parents and teachers to work together. This article indicates several pressing problems which parents face today and which teachers must understand well if they are to work effectively with the children.

**I** TOLD them off, and they deserved it! 'Your kids are monsters,' I said. 'They're impossible to live with and to work with. It's your fault and your problem. I have them only five hours a day, but you'll have them the rest of your lives!'

With pride and pleasure, an elementary school teacher of the discipline-is-everything school thus re-stated what she had said to a group of parents at a recent Parents' Night. She ventured further and told them collectively what they were doing wrong and what was wrong with their children. Destructively, tactlessly, unknowingly she bolstered her own ego and sense of importance and at the same time alienated the very persons who could help her most with her daily problems. But she didn't need any help, she thought. "The whole bad bunch of kids in my room add up to your problem," she said to the parents.

Perhaps this situation is an extreme one. But maybe it is time for the teachers who haven't done so to appraise the situation in which most parents find themselves these days. Teachers certainly are not the only

ones who have daily problems to face. Many teachers, especially the unmarried ones without dependents and the married teachers whose husbands and wives are working, are at least relieved of the major pressure facing the majority of parents—the financial burden.

What are some of the factors in the home lives of their children which all teachers must consider? What in the background and future of the child, as well as in his present, is responsible for the way he thinks, acts and talks?

Through answers to these questions may come a teacher who is less in the ivory tower of his own life and who is more tolerant of the problems his children bring to school with them. Out of such understanding may also develop a teacher with more warmth and less rigidity, a person whose dignity comes not from the authority vested in him due to his education, age, height, loudness of voice or sternness of countenance, but rather whose dignity comes from recognizing the undermining pressures on parents which inevitably reflect themselves in their children.

## Parents Face These Problems

Among the key problem situations faced by parents, and which ask sympathetic understanding on the part of teachers, are the following:

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1. *High prices.* When children's shoes, outgrown in weeks or months, cost \$6 or more, when milk is far beyond 20 cents a quart (\$1 a day means a milk bill of \$30 a month), when children's clothing costs more and lasts a far shorter period of time than did the adult clothing a few years ago—all of these add up to serious problems faced by the majority of parents every day. It is true that wages are higher than ever, but prices have so outrun them that the "average" mother is forced to consider wage-earning on her own to augment the family income. Only one of the many current family tensions is caused by the need for cutting down on insurance, making adult clothes last much longer than they ever had to, and stinting on the family food budget. Most parents cannot escape the squeeze of the shrinking dollar bill. Nor can their children.

2. *Military service.* How many fathers of your children have been in military service? How many are forced to think about breaking up their homes and leaving their jobs to go again? How many of your children were born or lived their first few years while their mothers were clinging to a semblance of family life while following their husbands from camp to camp? The jammed war towns, the rooming houses charging \$20 or more a week for dingy, back rooms, mothers and babies in steaming hot or freezing bus or railroad terminals—all of these experiences can never be forgotten by the parents, nor outlived by the children. Perhaps the teachers who do not know about them, have forgotten, do not care or do not feel they are of any importance might reconsider.

3. *Atom bomb.* Yesterday it was the atom bomb, today it's the hydrogen bomb and tomorrow it may be something else. Whatever it is, many children will be equally threatened, made insecure and given little understanding of what is going on. Many will be crowded into corridors, and told to crouch against the walls and hide their heads. Some teachers will discuss this new experience with them and a minority will do what they can in this difficult situation to alleviate the terror which children feel and few adults understand. But the other children will go home with their burden. They may or may not talk about it to their parents. In the night, however, the terror may reach the surface, for tears and fearful crying are not uncommon in the night-time of the 1953 American home. And nightmares far away from school and hours after the three o'clock bell rings are part of the teacher's responsibility. He must know about them and do whatever he can to calm the fears.

4. *Crowded housing.* The era of two or more families in an apartment, of six or eight persons sleeping in one room, is sadly still with us. The child who has never known what it is to get into a cool, clean bed alone, whose knowledge of sex relationships has always seemed a part of him, and who does not know what a 12-hour night of quiet is may not understand some of the things many teachers take for granted. "Hang your two toothbrushes in the bathroom" (18 are lying around in his bathroom, only one is his, and he's never absolutely sure that he uses the same one time after time), "take a bath every day" (there's not enough

hot water for all of them, even if his mother *did* have the time to bathe all six of the young ones), or "do your home work where it's quiet" (some joke to many children!). The teacher who does not know what goes on in the homes of his children is missing one of the main sources of information.

### **Parental Worries Affect Children**

Not directly in line with the current world situation, although indirectly an outgrowth of it, are some parental worries like the following:

1. *Family conflicts.* A study of family situations by Bossard and Boll resulted in a long list of home conflicts. For example, there are the homes which are possessive, over-solicitous, bickering, unreliable, nagging, frigid, neglectful or child-dictated—and in all of them the child is strongly affected. Parents may be separated, cultural conflicts of a religious, national, urban-rural or financial basis may exist, sudden wealth may appear—and again the children are caught in the middle. A child may be unwanted, may have been strongly desired for many years before conception, or may be sickly—and the effect on the individual child is apparent to any serious student of how children develop and grow. The obvious conflicts and frustrations of family life are frequently a thin disguise for the underlying causes. While teachers are limited in how far they may delve into such situations, that they exist and that they influence the attitudes and activities of children must be clearly understood.

2. *Authoritative confusion.* Never has a generation of parents been made

so aware of their handling of their own children. The huge sales of books telling parents how to live with their children are testimony to the hundreds of thousands of pseudo-experts we now have as heads of families. But since child authorities are sometimes confused and fluctuating in the advice they give, the parents are even more mixed up and worried. "Shall I love—or ignore?" "Shall I feed on the clock—or demand?" "Shall I be a pal—or a parent?" "Am I doing right—or wrong?" Many authorities speak soundly on the basis of long experience and study, using the best of the past and bringing it up to date. But for some the human quality is missing, a key factor making an authority different from a parent and causing him to lack a real understanding of parents. If he has never lived with his own children 24 hours each day, walked the floor with a sick child at night, and taken the persistence which only parents of young children have so thoroughly endured, then his advice and suggestions, no matter how scientifically correct and useful they are, may be limited in their value. The close relationship between experience and learning has a place here similar to the one it holds in other educational activities.

3. *Teachers.* Parents are worried about teachers. They worry about the teachers their children now have and will have next year. "Will she be patient?" "Will she know how far my child has progressed—and take him on from there?" "Will she try to overlook his faults and realize how precious he is to me?" Just in being a teacher, the latter becomes a problem to conscien-

tious parents who are entrusting a most valuable possession to them.

The seven factors mentioned so far, and many others related to them, can provide a cornerstone of understanding for teachers when they look at their children and try to accept and appreciate the problems of the parents. But this understanding is a two-way street, for parents certainly must also work constantly to understand the problems of teachers. They may have difficulty with two children, but what about the teacher with 48? They may be tempted to criticize what a particular teacher does, but do they have all the facts? They may show favoritism toward one of their own children, so can they ex-

pect teachers not even to have human preferences for one person over another? Are they as objective about the job of the teacher as they might be?

In the current years of tremendous world strain, in a period of uncertainty and worry, there is more need than ever for parents and teachers to work together, for each to understand the problems of the other. More home visitation by teachers, more school visitation by parents, more striving to do a good job of educating a generation which faces a bigger challenge than any other has faced—that becomes the task ahead. The major incentive lies in the importance and worth-whileness of such a cooperative venture.

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## *School and Home Cooperate To Meet Juvenile Delinquency*

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Only as home and school participate in getting at basic causes can problems of juvenile delinquency be effectively met.

ANY STATE or community program aimed at preventing and controlling undesirable behavior must center most of its efforts in two areas. First, it must make a coordinated and scientific attempt at early identification of children who are vulnerable or exposed to delinquent behavior. Second, it must follow through with a system of individualized therapy based on a careful study of the predelinquent or delinquent child and his total environment. In view of the origins of much delinquent behavior, few agencies which come in close contact with children for

any period of time can offer greater mutual aid to the delinquent or predelinquent than that which arises from the bilateral force of the effective school working hand in hand with the good home. There are a number of promising ways in which school and home can work together both to reduce or minimize, by way of prevention, those community factors which have been shown to foster problems of delinquent behavior, and to help, by way of rehabilitation or treatment, those children who have already established undesirable patterns of behavior.

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